DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 215 769 CS 207 100

AUTHOR Rubin, Janet E.
TITLE Back to Basics through Creative Dramatics.
PUB DATE [78]
NOTE 9p.

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Back to Basics; *Cerebral Dominance; *Creative Dramatics; Dramatic Play; English Instruction; *Holistic Approach; *Learning Activities; Primary Education; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

In the back to basics era, creative dramatics should still be used in the English classroom because it helps to develop the entire child. For some time, teaching strategies have been directed at the left brain, the hemisphere that deals with logical and linear functions. Recently, however, attention has been given to the right side of the brain, whose functions include unifying features into patterns and discerning meaning. Creative dramatics can provide this right brain learning; it also has an impact on a large variety of left-brain activities. The use of literature in creative dramatics helps to motivate students. Story dramatization, the heart of creative dramatics, leads children to read a story several times, and sharing a story in dramatic play develops vocabulary, sequencing, and comprehension skills. The effects of creative dramatics on both left- and right-brain learning proves it a sound educational technique. (JL)

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Dr. Janet E. Rubin
Assistant Professor of Child Drama
University of Northern Iowa
Cedar Falls, Iowa 50613

Back to Basics Through Creative Dramatics

Back to basics is an expression being used frequently in education today. In most academic situations, English will almost certainly be included in a basics curriculum, while creative dramatics will be categorized with the arts and assigned lower status. However, the arts "are basic to individual development since they more than any other subject awaken all the senses--the learning pores."[1] Using creative dramatics in the English classroom is one way to generate personalized learning experiences and to focus, as education should, on the growth and development of the total child.

Why should a teacher incorporate creative dramatics into a "basic" curriculum? Doing so will probably take more time. It will certainly stretch creativity in lesson planning. However, using creative dramatics in the classroom will not only interest students, thereby making the learning experience more meaningful, but will also motivate them. The kind of discipline a child develops through involvement in drama can be applied to study skills. In short, teachers concerned with developing a child's basic skills cannot afford to neglect an art form concerned with developing the entire child. The advantages to the child come in the form of pleasurable, motivated learning, improved oral expression, increased self-confidence, self-discovery, constructive use of physical energy, and

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improved imaginative response. For the teacher, drama can be used to present concepts, check for comprehension, and produce satisfaction as she/he watches the enjoyment and enthusiasm of young people as they learn.

For some time, teaching has emphasized instructional strategies assigned to the left hemisphere of the brain, which deals with logical and linear functions. Recently, however, attention has been given to the right hemisphere of the brain, whose functions include unifying features into patterns and discerning meaning. Teachers need to be aware of both types of functions in order to plan and execute teaching strategies which will maximize learning. While the hemispheres of the brain function differently, their ability to enhance each other will produce a more complete learning experience. The left and right hemispheres, working together, are needed to educate the total child.

Because creative dramatics is experiential learning, it is a natural vehicle for developing a whole pattern of meaning from diverse parts. In dramatizing stories, for example, players work with such dramatic elements as character, plot, and dialogue which, in combination, give dimension to the author's concepts. Meaning is clarified on several levels. If, for example, young children are asked to try on the character of Pinocchio in preparation for a playing of that story, not only can they learn that a possibly new vocabulary word, Marionette, means a type of puppet, but that it is a type of puppet with wooden joints which moves awkwardly, and is light weight. Things are known to us not only by their linguistic concepts but also "by their visual features, their smells, the kind of body movement that they permit and encourage, by what they express symbolically, by their taste, and by their pervasive emotional quality."[2] In the example cited, the left-brain task of defining has been enhanced through right-brain

activity. In creating characters, children must examine the feelings, reactions, and behaviors of that character. This type of analysis should enable them to better understand the behavior of people in real-life interactions. This type of learning draws patterns of meaning from both verbal and nonverbal communication which can be applied to both literary and non-literary stimuli. Creative play becomes serious business in a child's exploratory efforts at knowing and understanding. Information processed through creative dramatics becomes tangible and meaningful.

In synethesizing impressions, the right-brain makes use of sensory awareness, empathy, imaginative involvement, relevance to self, and other methods of creating meaning. These are, likewise, the tools of creative dramatics. Innumerable creative dramatics activities can be designed which foster right-brain learning through assimilation of literary, sensory, and visual concepts, translation of words to images, correlation of feeling and oral expression, and development of inferences which lead to creative thinking. Imaginative planning, skilled guiding, and open and honest evaluation by both teachers and pupils can bring to light connections between what is developed in dramatic play and what is being stressed in the English classroom.

Dramatic play is a form of communication which equalizes, for both those who are academically successful and those who are not share opportunities for excellence given this format. By building upon abilities, creative dramatics not only validates previous learning, but encourages the use of that learning as a bridge to new comprehension. In summarizing the results of research on creative dramatics and language development,

Massey and Koziol offer the conclusion that the use of creative dramatics spans populations. The studies reviewed show "that the long term and consistent use of creative dramatics activities can have positive impact on the oral and written language abilities of children of widely different ages, with different 'academic' abilities, and from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds."[3] Learning and meaning become assimilated through active participation in the process.

Equally important is creative dramatics' impact on left-brain activities. Research suggests that creative dramatics has a positive impact upon the teaching of the following skills: recognition of alphabet letters, classification and recognition of parts of speech, following directions, intonation, listening, learning capitalization and punctuation, finding main ideas, comprehending multiple meanings, spelling, vocabulary development, recalling detail, sequencing events, and developing cognitive and comprehensive abilities.[4] Allowing children to form letters with their bodies, for example, can be used to teach letter recognition, capitalization, and spelling. Greater attention is paid when children know that they must be aware of such factors as details and sequencing in order to dramatize the story. Even on a back to basics curriculum, the importance of motivation and pleasure in learning cannot be discounted, especially when they are integrated with the presentation of basic skills.

The use of literature in creative dramatics also serves as a motivational factor. Story dramatization is at the heart of the creative dramatics process and "using poetry and prose for drama ensures exposure to more literature than children ordinarily encounter in reading programs."[5] In order to be more accurate in their playing, children may read a story

several times. Sharing a story in dramatic play enables a child to interpret the meaning of words in context, understanding the meaning, mood, or situation they represent through actual use. The creation of dialogue encourages vocabulary development, and vocal interpretation adds dimension to definition. Sequencing and comprehension skills develop as children learn to re-tell a story through action.

Creative dramatics can be an enjoyable way of sharing ideas, communicating thoughts and feelings, exploring meaning, and developing the total child. It encourages proficiency in perception and assimilation of information. Creative dramatics stimulates the imagination, and imaginative involvement plays an important role in keeping the learning process from becoming mechanical. By affecting both left- and right-brain learning, creative dramatics can not only add interest and variety to the English program, but can do so in an educationally sound fashion.

Dr. Janet E. Rubin
Assistant Professor of Child Drama
University of Northern Iowa
Cedar Falls, Iowa 50613

Footnotes

[1]Thomas Quinn and Cheryl Hanks, Coming to Our Senses: The Significance of the Arts for American Education (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1977).

[2]Elliot W. Eisner, "Reading and the Creation of Meaning," in Reading, the Arts, and the Creation of Meaning, ed. Elliot Eisner (National Arts Education Association, 1978), p. 18.

[3]Julie Massey and Stephen Koziol, Jr., "Research on Creative Dramatics," English Journal, 67, No. 2 (1978), 93.

[4]For more information on studies in this area, see the following: Rose M. Feinberg, "Acting Out Language Skills," Instructor, 86, No. 2 (1976), 167-168; Linda C. Henderson and James L. Shanker, "The Use of Interpretive Dramatics Versus Basal Reader Workbooks for Developing Comprehension Skills," Reading World, 17, No. 3 (1978), 239-243; Julie Massey and Stephen Koziol, Jr., "Research on Creative Dramatics," English Journal, 67, No. 2 (1978), 92-95; Elinor R. Ross and Betty D. Roe, "Creative Drama Builds Proficiency in Reading," Reading Teacher, 30, No. 4 (1977), 383-387.

[5]John W. Stewig, "Drama: Integral Part of the Language Arts," Elementary English, 51, No. 1 (1974), 67.

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